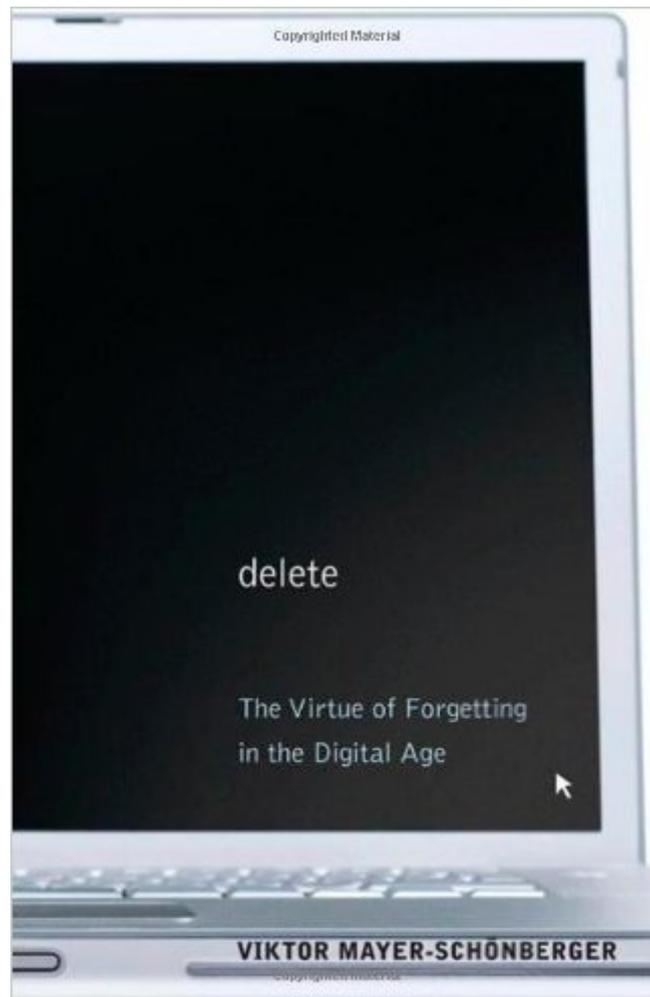# Delete: The Virtue Of Forgetting In The Digital Age

Synopsis

Delete looks at the surprising phenomenon of perfect remembering in the digital age, and reveals why we must reintroduce our capacity to forget. Digital technology empowers us as never before, yet it has unforeseen consequences as well. Potentially humiliating content on Facebook is enshrined in cyberspace for future employers to see. Google remembers everything we've searched for and when. The digital realm remembers what is sometimes better forgotten, and this has profound implications for us all. In Delete, Viktor Mayer-Schönberger traces the important role that forgetting has played throughout human history, from the ability to make sound decisions unencumbered by the past to the possibility of second chances. The written word made it possible for humans to remember across generations and time, yet now digital technology and global networks are overriding our natural ability to forget--the past is ever present, ready to be called up at the click of a mouse. Mayer-Schönberger examines the technology that's facilitating the end of forgetting--digitization, cheap storage and easy retrieval, global access, and increasingly powerful software--and describes the dangers of everlasting digital memory, whether it's outdated information taken out of context or compromising photos the Web won't let us forget. He explains why information privacy rights and other fixes can't help us, and proposes an ingeniously simple solution--expiration dates on information--that may.Delete is an eye-opening book that will help us remember how to forget in the digital age.

Book Information

Paperback: 272 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press; With a New afterword by the author edition (July 25, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691150362

ISBN-13: 978-0691150369

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars See all reviews (14 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #794,921 in Books (See Top 100 in Books)   #92 in Books > Computers & Technology > History & Culture > Computer & Internet Law   #120 in Books > Law > Legal Theory & Systems > Science & Technology   #5244 in Books > Science & Math > Technology

Customer Reviews

In this interesting but not always persuasive book, lawyer and policy analyst Viktor

Mayer-Schonberger asserts that being able to forget stuff is a requirement for human social evolution.For anyone who misplaces his spectacles or keys, this may seem surprising, but Mayer-Schonberger makes the case for it in at least some aspects of daily life. He concentrates on old resentments, which may cripple us if brooded over too long.Maybe. Further, he claims that the digital revolution has made it impossible for us to usefully forget.He presents a couple of examples: One is a Canadian psychologist who wrote a research paper in a journal mentioning his use of LSD in the '60s. American immigration officials, using Internet search, matched his name and - declaring him to be a dangerous drug user - denied him entrance.This seems to me less a problem of too much remembering than of too stupid governors, but Mayer-Schonberger does explain in great detail about how much information the combination of digital speed and cheap memory can store. And even create, by data mining.It doesn't have to be information you put on the Internet, either. Insurance companies routinely get records of most of the prescriptions pharmacies sell, and they can reconstruct much of your medical history - a history that is otherwise legally supposed to be private.This part is plenty scary, whether there is a problem with not forgetting or not.Mayer-Schonberger then leads us through various legal and technical fixes to the problem of too much memory too long. The Europeans have taken a hard-line view of privacy. This leads to absurd results: German universities are not allowed to reveal who they have awarded degrees to.

The first half of the book is dedicated to setting the stage. It is a rather detailed and rich account of the history of the contemporary information environment particularly print, evolution of the memory devices and information storage, and development of information governance institutions (defined in broader terms) such as copyright. While I was aware of some of the stories, many of them were rather new to me. For example, did you know that the subject index, as an alphabetical list of topics covered in a book, was introduced in thirteenth century, but the idea of adding page numbers to the index to ease the actual navigation was added only in the sixteenth century? Quite interesting.Telling this history Mayer-Schönberger draws a picture of ever growing body of information about us, as individual members of society, and the way we may interact with it, even if in an indirect way. One of his favorite examples is the story of Stacy Snyder who was denied her teaching certificate because of a picture she had posted on MySpace of her dressed as a drunken pirate. The gist of the argument, if I read it correctly, is that while it becomes easier and cheaper to collect and store information about us and our behavior, we, as individuals, are losing more and more control over that information (once you or somebody else posts your picture online, you no longer have control over where it may appear, who may see it, and in what context). He labels it in

terms of remembering and forgetting - if in the past it was difficult and costly to remember and easy and cheap to forget, this balance has reversed.These days it is so easy and cheap to remember that we start losing our ability to forget.

This book is not going to be to everyone's liking because it divides into two distinct section. In the beginning, the book deals with large, abstract ideas about human history and memory. The author argues that in the analog world forgetting was the norm and remembering was hard because it was difficult to store information in an easily accessible and permanent form. The author's discussion here is fascinating, as he points out how analog information slowly decays as it is copied (think of the hiss in a cassette recording of a previous cassette tape or the blurriness of a mimeograph of a mimeograph), the medium for storage disintegrates over time, and information in these forms is hard to index. By contrast, in the digital realm remembering becomes the default because digital information is easy to back up and cheap to store. In addition, deleting digital information requires effort: As anybody who has let a huge electronic photo library unwittingly build up realizes, it takes time to go through all those photos and decide which ones to keep. Forgetting is no longer effortless.Mayer-Schonberger then argues that there are serious social problems associated with this change that most people have failed to fully understand. Perhaps his largest concern is that perfect digital memory will freeze how someone is perceived because a perfect record of a person's past deeds or misdeeds will create an illusion that we know the person's character and thereby deny the reality that people change over time. He also believes that perfect memory will overwhelm us with meaningless data that will make it hard to decide how to act.

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